

Religious Tests of Campaign 2012

Though the United States has a tradition of separating church and state, the 2012 presidential campaign may test the limits of that tolerance. Not only do some Republicans continue to question Barack Obama's Christianity, but GOP front-runner Mitt Romney is a Mormon and other contenders, such as Sarah Palin, are Christian fundamentalists, as the Rev. Howard Bess explains.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

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Many religious Americans have an ambivalent view toward the separation of church and state, wanting political figures to be religious but to leave their religion out of political encounters.

The reality has been that for most of U.S. history, American politics at the highest levels was dominated by a Masonic brand of Protestantism. However, in 1960, when John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon competed for the presidency, there was a sizeable minority of Americans who firmly believed that a Roman Catholic president would make America subservient to Rome and the Catholic Pope.

For instance, one false story was circulated claiming that Kennedy planned to change the name of the Statue of Liberty to Our Lady of the Harbor.

Kennedy's Catholicism was such a major issue that he made a trip to the hostile environs of Texas to make a clear statement that he was a better American than he was a Roman Catholic. He won the presidency by the narrowest of margins.

Since then, religion has become an ongoing and open topic in American politics led by the emergence of a unique American Evangelicalism.

All of American Evangelicalism, as we know it today, has its roots in the Baptist and Methodist traditions. Both religions were known as aggressive, proselytizing denominations, although those tendencies diminished in the last half of the 20th Century, except in the South.

However, the Baptist and Methodist religions spawned the Evangelical movements, both independent and the Pentecostal, which hold generally that the Bible was divinely inspired and is infallible.

At first, American Evangelicals were politically quiet. However, Jerry Falwell and other Christian fundamentalist ministers perceived the potential political power of the burgeoning Evangelical movement and went into action.

In 1979, Falwell and others right-wing religious figures launched what they

called the Moral Majority, which gave the political life of American Evangelicals a giant push. Ever since, Evangelicals have been a dominant political force. Every American president since Jimmy Carter has found it necessary to make known his "born-again" experience with Jesus.

The 2008 presidential campaign became an even more complex web of religion and politics. Sen. John McCain, though raised an Episcopalian, quietly had become an Evangelical. Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Mormon, made a speech that reminded many people of John Kennedy's Texas declaration. Romney promised to be more American than Mormon.

Barack Obama had to clarify his relationship with his controversial pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and Wright's Christian church in Chicago where Obama was "born again." Obama's denial of being a Muslim is still questioned by some opponents.

After securing the Republican nomination, McCain surprised the nation by choosing Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin to be his vice-presidential running mate. She was no ordinary outspoken Evangelical. She was a Pentecostal Evangelical, part of a non-rational Christianity in which personal experience with God trumps all other considerations.

Pentecostalism is the fastest growing segment of American Christianity, and the rise of Sarah Palin is truly historic. Her staying power may surprise some, but it does not surprise those who grasp the strength of American Pentecostalism.

Today, Mitt Romney is considered the front-runner for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, and in a campaign dominated by jobs, health care, finances and unpopular wars, nothing much has been said about Romney's religion, so far.

However, in Robert Putnam's and David Campbell's book about American religion, entitled *American Grace*, the authors note the political difficulties Romney may face as a Mormon. Though Mormons, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have much in common they are pro-life (anti-abortion), oppose gay marriage, speak forcefully about family values and are all aggressive proselytizing faiths they have important differences.

Many Christians, and especially Evangelicals and Pentecostals, consider Mormons not simply heretics, but a cult. Voting for a Christian with a differing opinion can be accepted, but voting for a candidate who is a member of a cult is an entirely different matter.

Most political leaders will speak of tolerance and acceptance of religious diversity; however, polls show a different story. In a 2008 Harris poll, 58 percent of Evangelicals indicated they would be bothered by a Mormon president.

The tensions produced by the intersection of religion and politics often are underplayed by columnists and television talking heads. In the process, they may be missing a huge part of the story of the 2012 presidential elections.

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